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ABSTRACT

Recent information drawn from the Educational Products Information Exchange (EPIE) Institute's six-year survey and assessment of instructional materials used in United States schools is reported in this paper. Among the conclusions, observations, and recommendations reported are the following: as currently practiced in most schools, the selection of textbooks and other materials is producing an instructionally unproductive misfitting of materials to the capabilities of learners; commercially marketed materials tend to structure and often define the classroom curriculum--a situation that does not guarantee instructional effectiveness; many of these materials may best be defined as "curriculum structuring" materials that structure class time and activities rather than instructional materials; the most widely marketed and used materials in the curriculum areas of reading, language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies are largely of the curriculum structuring type and are being produced by fewer and fewer publishers; and effective "packaging" is a more potent influence on sales than is careful attention to curriculum design or instructional effectiveness. The paper concludes with a call for more inservice training in the selection of appropriate instructional materials and for the use of learner verification in selecting materials. (FL)

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What Curriculum Leaders Need to Know About Selecting Instructional Materials

Notes for Presentation to ASCD, Atlanta, Ga. March 31, 1980

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For six years EPIE Institute has been studying the selection, marketing, and use of curriculum materials in U.S. schools. Much of this work has been done as part of EPIE's ongoing National Survey and Assessment of Instructional Materials which began in 1974 and has involved over 12,000 teachers and 8,000 principals in 50 states. Other aspects of this work are EPIE's continuous monitoring of the educational marketplace with an emphasis on school selection practices.

What follows are some recent conclusions, observations, and recommendations that may be grouped under the heading: Things that curriculum leaders need to know about selecting instructional materials.

1. As currently practiced in most schools, the selection of textbooks and other materials is producing an instructionally unproductive misfitting of materials to the capabilities of learners. (e.g., fourth graders in both wealthy communities and in poorer communities were tested on the content of their math text prior to its year-long use. In wealthier communities 60% of students score 80% or better when tested on their texts' content before use - and slightly less well after they had used the text for a year. In poorer communities 87% of the students scored 38% or less before a year's use of their text and no better after a full year's use.) *

2. The importance of such findings is underscored by the results of three separate nation-wide surveys (two by EPIE Institute* in 1976 and 1979 and the other by the National Science Foundation in 1978) which point to the fact that commercially marketed products are being used during 90%-95% of all instructional time in U.S. classrooms (Textbooks 65%-70% of this time; nontext and nonprint materials 25%-30% of the time). When the 12,000 teachers who participated in two of these studies were asked what they would do if

* Details of study available from :EPIE Institute
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if they couldn't use the material they were currently using, most teachers replied, "use another commercially available product."

3. These commercially marketed materials tend to structure, and in many cases, define the "classroom curriculum" which, despite all the attention given to matching these materials to instructional objectives, does not guarantee instructional effectiveness.

4. Not only do these textbooks and related materials structure the classroom curriculum but many of them are perhaps best defined as curriculum structuring materials, rather than instructional materials. The job of such materials -- as their publishers will hasten to point out -- is to provide general structure for class time and activities, during which the teacher presumably attends to the actual instructional task. Other materials do more than simply provide a curriculum structure for the teacher. These materials contain specific instructional aids including diagnostic and prescriptive techniques and instrumentation related to achieving specific behavioral objectives, measured by criterion-referenced achievement tests. Still other materials go further and include the specific "instructuring" strategies to be employed by the teacher in order to bring about specific learning objectives and general learning goals. Finally, there are those materials, some of which have begun to appear recently on microcomputers that, in fact, carry out every aspect of the instructional process from diagnosis and prescription, through the presentation of basic and alternative instructional sequences to testing and recycling (when needed) before the final assessment of student learning. However, neither the sellers nor the selectors of these various levels of materials are very clear about which type of product they are selling and buying, and about the specific curriculum/instructional function the material can best perform.

5. The most widely marketed and therefore most widely used materials (some 15-20 products each, in each of the five major curriculum areas of reading, language arts, mathematics, science and social studies) are (1) largely of the curriculum-structuring type, (2) being produced by fewer and fewer publishers.

6. Clearly, the relatively few commercial companies that dominate the education industry have a greater effect on the structuring of the curriculum as it is directly experienced by learners than most local curriculum leaders can hope to have. And the less clear curriculum leaders are about what it is they are buying and for what purpose it will be used the more these companies -- by default -- will affect the nature of the instruction that is implicit or explicit in their products.

7. These companies, and the industry in general, listen more closely to what you as curriculum professionals say to them with the dollars you spend, than what you say to each other at the various curriculum conferences you attend.

8. Consequently, these more successful companies know that they must develop, package, and market products that curriculum people are going to buy or recommend for purchase. They also have discovered that effective "packaging" is a more potent influence on sales than careful attention to curriculum design or instructional effectiveness. Evidence of this phenomena is (1) schools continue to buy well-packaged products that have essentially the same curriculum as those they are abandoning, (2) schools buy products that have never been tested, revised, and improved on the basis of feedback from learners.

9. Because many products differ more in their packaging than in instructional quality, curriculum professionals might ask: Is this new material really any different or clearly superior to what we now have? Can I justifyits purchase on either of these important grounds? Why not concentrate on inservice training programs that help teachers to fit, and make better instructional use of, the many unused and underused print and (especially) nonprint curriculum materials already owned by schools? Why not buy only those materials, that have been thoroughly tested, revised, and improved -- and continuously improved over time - - on the basis of feedback from learners?

Needed: Local coalitions of curriculum professionals, media librarians, and administrators who see it in their best interests and in the best interests of teachers and learners to change the way their schools select, install, interrelate, and use instructional materials to fit with each other and with the capabilities of learners.

Objective: To make optimum instructional use of all types of materials by better specification of their role with and fit to learners.

This may not be possible without a common inservice training and staff development experience, a common, integrated school building-based materials selection system; plus district-wide policies that support the well-integrated use of available instructional materials to fit the capabilities of learners. Given the research study referred to in my first point, this will mean a program of pretesting materials with representative learners before issuing them for year-long use.

Aside from the question of whether the particular textbooks selected by the schools in this EPIE study should have been purchased, there are two more fundamental questions: Why do most schools fail to assess the learning needs of students adequately and use that information to fit learning materials to learner capabilities? Why do the producers of these materials fail to test and label their products in ways that would help schools achieve a better materials-to-learner fit? Unfortunately, the second question is answered by the first. School consumers don't demand such information because few use it when they select materials. The learners are the losers.

Local and state school boards spend about a billion dollars on new textbooks and other instructional materials every year. EPIE's 1976 study found that, as already mentioned, these products are used by teachers and students during more than 90 percent of all instructional time. That's well over 40 billion student/teacher hours annually. Our present study suggests that a good deal of these dollars and hours are being wasted because of poor selection by those who buy the products and inadequate product testing and labeling by those who sell them.

EPIE testified to the Congress in 1971 that 99 percent of the materials being bought by schools had never been tested or revised on the basis of learner feedback. Unfortunately, the situation hasn't changed much since 1971. A current EPIE Report, devoted to the issue of improving materials through learner verification and revision does contain examples of some excellent efforts by a few publishers to better fit learner needs by testing and revising their products. But most publishers EPIE surveyed for this Report are still not doing very much about improving their products on the basis of learner feedback. In the meantime, schools continue to spend tax dollars on untested, unimproved materials and continue to misfit them to learners.

Neither EPIE nor the National Institute of Education, which funded the study referred to in my first point, believes that research findings alone will change school practices. This is why, in addition to funding EPIE's research, NIE also funded EPIE to develop and test the country's first comprehensive training program in materials selection. This training program was developed with the help of a national task force of curriculum and media specialists. It has been tested and revised after trials in school districts, teachers colleges, and regional workshops. EPIE has recently begun leasing this training program to school districts and training local curriculum leaders to use it in training local materials selectors. This training also prepares these selectors to make effective use of EPIE's evaluations and analyses of competing curriculum products.

The need for such inservice training is enormous because training in materials selection is taught in so few colleges. Lately, faculty in teacher training colleges have become interested in using EPIE's materials as the basis for courses at their institutions. The sooner this sort of training becomes a priority in local school districts and teachers colleges, the sooner the problem of misfitting materials to the requirements of teachers and to the needs of learners will be solved. In the meantime, the price we are all paying in wasted instructional productivity is enormous.